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ABSTRACT

A study examined how maternal separation anxiety contributes to the mother's departure actions and how those behaviors affect the child during separation. Subjects were 40 mothers and their toddlers, age 15 to 24 months, who were observed before and during separation. After completing the Maternal Separation Anxiety Questionnaire, mothers were provided with information designed to heighten or diminish their anxiety while departing. Results indicated that mothers separated differently depending on whether or not they used day care centers, but their preparations did not influence children's separation distress. Instead, children's separation distress varied with day care use and mothers' anxiety. Day care center children whose mothers experienced diminished anxiety and alternate care children whose mothers tested with low maternal separation anxiety showed less distress during separation than other children. Results suggest that day care center efforts to lower the anxiety for the departing mother might improve the child's adaptation to separation. (MDM)

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ANXIETY AND DAYCARE: EFFECTS ON MOTHERS' AND CHILDREN'S SEPARATION BEHAVIORS

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Anxiety and Daycare: Effects on Mothers'
and Children's Separation Behavior

Abstract

Forty mothers and their 15-24-month-old children were observed before and during separation. After completing the Maternal Separation Anxiety Questionnaire, mothers were provided with information designed to heighten or diminish their anxiety while departing. Mothers separated differently depending on whether they used daycare centers or not, but their preparations did not influence children's separation distress. Instead, children's separation distress varied with daycare use and mothers' anxiety: Daycare center children with mothers experiencing diminished anxiety and alternate care children whose mothers tested with lower maternal separation anxiety showed less distress during separation.

Effects of Anxiety and Childcare Type on Mother and Child Behavior at Separation

Summary

Maternal separation anxiety, a multi-dimensional and multiply determined characteristic, reflects mothers' attitudes and emotions about separation from their infants (Hock, 1984). Because it is believed to be a personality disposition, an internal attribute affected by conditions associated with the particular separation, specific situations may heighten or lower separation anxiety. However, it is unknown how much maternal separation anxiety contributes to the mother's actions at departure and how much her resultant behaviors directly or indirectly affect her child during separation.

Past research clearly supports a link between the mother's and child's behaviors before and during separation situation. Winer (1982) argued that anxiety can be communicated between mother and child; parental attempts to ameliorate anxiety may indeed increase children's distress. Field et al. (1983) identified several parental behaviors that aggravated children's distress at departure. Weinraub and Lewis (1977) suggested that mothers may serve as cues for children's behavior: Mothers' departure styles were significantly related to their children's distress during separation.

Forty mothers and their 15-24-month-old first-born children were observed during departure and separation. Situational

factors were manipulated to heighten or diminish mothers' anxiety in leaving their child. According to random assignment, mothers were instructed (a) by a friendly interviewer that they could observe an experienced woman escorting their child during a brief separation or (b) by a businesslike, vague interviewer that a gender-neutrally named escort would accompany their child during a lengthy separation. While mothers then prepared their child for separation, the effects of these instructions and of separation anxiety, as measured by the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (MSAS, Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989), were assessed on the mother's and child's behaviors.

Mothers who used daycare centers directed more return statements (e.g., "I'll be back"), $F(1,14)=14.78$, $p<.001$, and initiated more touch, $F(1,14)=5.57$, $p<.05$, than mothers who used alternate forms of childcare. No significant differences in mothers' behavior due to maternal separation anxiety were found in daycare center users. However, among alternate-care users, simple regressions revealed that mothers lower in maternal separation anxiety touched, $F(1,22)=8.22$, $p<.01$, and used more departing statements (e.g., "goodbye"), $F(1,22)=6.46$, $p<.05$, than did mothers higher in maternal separation anxiety.

Children's separation distress was positively related to maternal separation anxiety, $r(38)=.302$, $p<.05$, and to the heightened or diminished anxiety instructions, $r(38)=.383$, $p<.05$. Furthermore, a log-linear analysis revealed that heightened

anxiety instructions significantly increased children's distress when effects from high or low maternal separation anxiety were removed, $\chi^2(1,N=40)=5.54$, $p<.05$. Higher MSAS scores reliably predicted increased separation distress, $F(1,36)=4.331$, $p<.05$. Because daycare use influenced mothers' departure behaviors, its effects on children's distress were also examined. Higher maternal separation anxiety predicted child distress only for alternate-care users, $F(1,22)=11.49$, $p,.01$, not for daycare center users, $F(1,14)=.274$, $p>.20$.

What seems to have affected children's distress was the type of childcare used. Daycare center children became distressed when their mothers received discomforting separation instructions. Conversely, alternate-care children were distressed when their mothers were higher in maternal separation anxiety. Research evaluating the effects of daycare may be missing an important mediator -- the mother. It is unclear whether the transmission of anxiety between mother and child occurs directly or indirectly through maternal behavior (Hock, 1984; Hock et al., 1989; Winer, 1982). The present study demonstrates that mothers' anxieties due to dispositional or situational factors may be more relevant to children's distress than are mothers' behaviors. The extent to which maternal separation anxiety, or situational anxiety, is predictive of children's distress depends on the type of childcare utilized.

The findings seem consistent with Field et al.'s (1983)

conclusion that consistent daycare use affects parents' departure patterns and lessens children's distress. However, in the present study, daycare use appears to have directly influenced mothers', but not children's, behavior. Although maternal departure styles were related to type of childcare, these differing preparatory behaviors did not directly impact children's distress during separation. Therefore, if daycare centers were to concentrate on lowering anxiety for the departing mother, the child's adaptation to the separation might improve. Considering separation from the mothers point of view may open new areas of research to give a broader understanding of the effects of outside childcare.

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